

Ostia, Rome, and the world

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Port of call

There are few cities in the Roman world the remains of which can today be seen almost in their entirety. Along with Pompeii and Herculaneum in Italy, Lepcis Magna and Timgad in North Africa, and Ephesos and Aphrodisias in Turkey, the town of Ostia occupies a privileged place in our understanding of ancient city-life. About two-thirds of the populous harbour-town, a few miles to the west of Rome at the mouth of the Tiber, has been excavated. It flourished during the second and third centuries A.D., after the emperor Trajan's construction of the hexagonal harbour-basin at nearby Portus (which is still visible from the air to passengers flying into Fiumicino airport). This facility attracted unprecedented levels of trading to the area. The basic needs of the vast population of Rome, as well as the luxurious tastes of the imperial court, were largely met by goods supplied via Ostia.

The gradual encroachment of the sea and the persistence of malaria caused many of the town's inhabitants to migrate by the sixth century A.D., leaving the town to be reclaimed gradually by nature. Its buildings were plundered for materials by visitors from the surrounding area, from Rome, and even from as far afield as Amalfi and Pisa. The extensive excavation of the site resulted from the desire of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century popes to uncover artworks, and from the ambitions of the dictator Mussolini to recapture the glories of ancient Rome during the 1920-30s.

The extensive archaeological excavation of Ostia allows us to probe into the religious life of the town in great detail. Although each individual piece of evidence can be paralleled elsewhere, if taken together, they add up to a unique overall picture. We can trace two major characteristics particular to Ostia, which are reflected in its religious practices: the town's importance to the city of Rome, and the cosmopolitan nature of its population.

A Rome from Rome

Ostia's special relationship with the capital was largely the result of its crucial role in transporting and storing its corn supply. At Rome, popular unrest often arose during chronic food shortages, so Ostia's role in the provision of foodstuffs was particularly appreciated by the ruling classes. This explains the port's special status. Outside Rome, only Ostia had its own cohort of vigiles, or police-cum-fire brigade, stationed in its own purpose-built barracks. Their function was to safeguard Rome's food-supply once it had reached dry land.

The help of various gods was invoked, though, to ensure that it arrived in the first place. Each year on 27th January, a festival was held in honour of the twin gods Castor and Pollux, in their role as protectors of seafaring. This festival was presided over by an official from Rome, who would pray for calm weather. Even as late as 359, Rome's city prefect responded to the threat of a food shortage by appeasing these gods. The historian Ammianus Marcellinus records how 'while Tertullus sacrificed at Ostia in the temple of the Castors, the wind dropped and the sea was calmed; then the wind changed to a gentle breeze from the south and the ships in full sail entered the harbour and filled the granaries with corn'. The goodwill of the Egyptian goddess Isis was also invoked each year on 5th March.

More mundanely, long before it had become a major commer-

cial harbour, Ostia's function as a place of transit also ensured frequent contact with Rome's elite. This was where people, both embarked and disembarked for foreign lands – whether alive or dead. The funeral procession accompanying the ashes of Augustus' young heir, Gaius Caesar, which passed through Ostia, was commemorated in the local calendar. Gods too arrived at Ostia on their way to Rome. None other than Publius Cornelius Scipio went to welcome the Magna Mater (or Cybele, the Great Mother) to Italian soil at the height of the war against Hannibal in 205 B.C.

Three centuries later, the annual bull-sacrifices to the Great Mother, as commemorated by inscriptions, served to reaffirm the town's close links with Rome, and sought to safeguard what were perceived as being the most important components in society: 'a bull-sacrifice was celebrated in honour of the great Idaean mother of the gods for the preservation of the emperor Marcus Aurelius, (his son) Commodus, the empress Faustina, and all their other children; for the senate, the College of Fifteen in charge of foreign cults, the equestrian order, the army of the Roman people; for all that sail the seas ... for the town councillors of the colony of Ostia, for the reed-bearers and spear-bearers' (these last two being groups attached to the Great Mother's cult). Although inscriptions memorialising similar sacrifices are found in other towns, this combination of beneficiaries is unique to Ostia.

A world a port

Vast numbers of foreigners must have passed through the town, and many probably resided there for at least some time. As a result, its population was ethnically and socially mixed. Although it is not unusual to find 'foreign' cults in any Roman town, Ostia is notable for the variety and pervasiveness of non-Roman cults. The eastern deities Isis and Serapis had temples there, whilst Jupiter was worshipped in foreign guises as Jupiter Dolichenus and Jupiter Sabazius.

One of the most striking features of the excavated town is the large number and distribution of mithraea, shrines honouring the god Mithras. Fifteen small shrines have been found, evenly distributed throughout the town. This cult, which divided up its adherents into seven grades of initiates, each of which was linked with its own astrological symbol, became very popular in the third century A.D.. Its members known to us were of relatively humble background, probably freedmen, working in one of Ostia's many professional corporations. Sextus Pompeius Maximus, who was head of the cult throughout Ostia, was also the president of a guild of ferry-men. Similarly, a Fructosus, who built one mithraeum, was also the president of a professional guild, though the profession is unidentifiable. These were important men in their own spheres, but not very high up in Ostian society viewed as a whole.

One of the most exciting discoveries at Ostia occurred in the 1960s, when the widening of a modern road skirting the edges of the archaeological site uncovered a synagogue. Built in the first century A.D., it was further decorated in the second century, and continued to be used thereafter. The seven-branch candelabrum, symbol of Judaism, was engraved upon two columns. An inscription in Greek recorded the gift of an ark for the scriptures, but was headed by a typical Latin formula praying for the emperor's well-being. Such religious diversity gives the impression of a cosmopolitan society, putting the town on a par with

the city of Rome itself.

Only a small part of the site remains unexcavated, but we may speculate about what religious practices took place there. Given their widespread distribution, it seems likely that one or more mithraea remain to be found. Several of the temples known from inscriptions, such as the Temple of Isis, have also yet to be located. Technological advances in archaeology mean that we do not have to rely upon digging for information to emerge. Recent studies using resistivity (by which magnetic forces under the earth's surface are measured, revealing the presence and outline of buildings) have revealed that a Christian basilica is among the buildings still uncovered, and by excavating just a few small sample trenches, archaeologists have become fairly certain that this is none other than a basilica known to have been donated to the town by the first Christian emperor, Constantine the Great.

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You can find out more about Ostia at:

<http://www.rdg.ac.uk/Roman/Fieldwork/ostia1.html>

<http://ancient-rome.tripod.com/ostia/ostia.htm>